



84: Run Between the Raindrops by cali-chan

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Angst, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., Mike W.

Pairings: Mike W./Eleven/Jane H.

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-01-22 13:25:33

Updated: 2018-01-22 13:25:33

Packaged: 2019-12-17 00:25:04

Rating: K +

Chapters: 1

Words: 3,389

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

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"Have you ever thought about running away?" he asked. He wasn't looking at her, but instead was facing the lake, looking out into the rain, hands stuffed in the pockets of his jacket.

*We're treading water on a river of tears, and I don't know what to do.
I can take a beating, but I ain't gonna let it happen to you.*

~Pat Benatar, "Run Between the Raindrops."

"Mike, get back here. It's going to start raining soon."

He heard her. She could tell. (She wasn't sitting *that* far away.) He didn't respond to her call in any way, though; just continued trying—and failing miserably—to skip stones on the surface of the water.

"Mike," she insisted, leaning back against the trunk of the tree she was sitting by. "You're going to get soaked," she warned him. They'd come straight from the hospital to Lovers' Lake, not with any particular plans, but just not in a hurry to get back home. It being a school day, mid-afternoon, and on the chilly side of November, they'd thought the lake would be fairly empty and were proven correct. They weren't counting on the ominous rain clouds looming over the horizon.

They still weren't planning on leaving, but El had quickly sought cover inside the treeline. Mike, however, seemed to think that getting drenched would be a perfect physical representation of his current

mood, and so continued throwing stones at the water without heed for his girlfriend's warnings.

"Mike, come on," she tried one more time. And once again, the only response from him was the continuous *plonk, plonk, plonk* of the pebbles hitting the water and promptly sinking to the bottom.

Not knowing what else to do to grab his attention, she decided to try drastic measures. The next time he picked up a rock, she narrowed her eyes, focusing her mind on the pebble so that when he let go, it skipped smoothly once, twice, three and four times until it finally disappeared under the surface somewhere near the center of the lake.

Mike spun on his heel and glared at her. "Don't do that."

She frowned back at him. "I was just trying to help you."

"Someone might see," he retorted, emphatic.

Eleven looked around the lake, and then back at Mike. "There's no one here," she pointed out in a no-nonsense tone. "And I was just staring at the pebble. It doesn't matter if someone sees."

"We can't be sure of that," Mike countered with a sharp shake of his head. He, too, started looking around the lake like he expected some shadowy figure— one able to tell that Eleven had superpowers just by looking at her, apparently— to suddenly jump at them.

She bit the inside of her cheek, trying to keep herself from getting angry or feeling hurt. She knew it wasn't *her* he was mad at. "Fine, I won't do it again," she threw back, a little harsher than intended. She sighed. "Get under the trees, please? You'll get rained on."

He looked for a second like he was going to refuse, but then he looked up at the sky and wiped away a droplet that had just fallen right on his cheek. It was starting to rain. With a resigned sigh he moved closer to where she was under the shadow of the trees and, now removed from the rocks he'd been tinkering with, was left with no outlet for his anxiety other than pacing.

She tried not to watch him as he did so, choosing instead to gaze out at the lake as the rain started coming down harder. She didn't always

like the rain, especially when it came along with thunder and lightning, but in cases when it was quiet save for the sound of falling droplets she actually found it quite calming. Plus, being with Mike in the middle of the forest like this reminded her of the day they met. The good parts of it, at least.

It was a few minutes of her reflecting on this until she realized, out of the corner of her eye, that Mike had stopped pacing and was just standing there. She heard him shuffle his feet. "Have you ever thought about running away?" he asked, surprising her enough that she turned to look at him fully. He wasn't looking at her, but instead was facing the lake, looking out into the rain much like she had been, hands stuffed in the pockets of his jacket.

She stretched out her legs, feeling pins and needles since she'd been sitting in the same position for so long. A couple of drops of water had managed to scurry through the canopy and fell on her arm. "I already did," she reminded him. She'd told him about Chicago a long time ago, about everything that happened there and how it connected to everything that was happening now.

"Ah, that's right," he muttered to himself, almost like it had temporarily slipped his mind. As if it could, given the circumstances. "But you came back because your sister and her gang were terrible people," he added, turning to look in her direction.

"No," she shook her head, looking up at his face, "I came back for you. For all of you," she clarified, although of course being able to see Mike again had been a large factor in that decision. "You were in trouble. I needed to make sure you were safe."

He pulled his hands out of his pockets abruptly so he could run them through his hair in frustration. "Yeah, well, what if I want *you* to be safe?" he threw back, starting to pace again. "I don't know, I just—" He let out his breath in a disheartened huff. "Sometimes I wish we could just go and... get away from all the *shit* that keeps happening here over and over and over again." He shook his head again. "Maybe then we could actually have a normal life without having to look over our shoulder all the time. Without... wondering when the *next* terrifying Upside Down encounter will happen that will leave us scarred for life."

"You want to leave Hawkins?" Eleven asked once he seemed to hit a pause in his rant, only now grasping the fact that he didn't mean "running away" as in some road trip, some adventure for them to "see the world" out there, like they'd talked about in the past. He was really talking about *leaving*. For good. "What about school?" she posited.

"We'd figure something out," he almost waved the concern away, still pacing.

"What about money?" she tried again.

"We'd *figure something out*," he repeated, his tone a little stronger.

"What about the others?" she insisted. "Hopper? Your family?" She had to ask, because while Hawkins was her home, the biggest lesson she'd learned from that escapade to Chicago was that "home" is not a place; home is the people you love.

Mike knew that, too, but he seemed upset enough that he was looking at it from a completely different perspective. "Well, maybe that way they won't be in danger anymore!" he threw back, stopping abruptly in his pace.

She could read between the lines easily enough. "Because of me." She said it as a statement rather than as a question, because it was a fact she'd been more than aware of for years. She knew that's not what he meant, but that's how she felt: That every weird, dangerous thing that happened in Hawkins could be traced directly to her. The monsters, the Upside Down— all because she opened the gate. The shadowy government conspiracies that never seemed to end even after the lab closed down— all because she had these powers, these abilities that they thought they could exploit. It was all because of her. She was the source, the common denominator.

He seemed to know what she was thinking, because he scowled down at her. "This is not your fault," he declared, determined to make her agree. It wasn't the first time he tried to assure her that she wasn't to blame.

No matter how many times he tried, though, she could never fully

accept it. "You *just* said it." She emphasized her point with a movement of her arm. "If I go, they won't be in danger," she repeated his own words back to him.

"*El, none of this is your fault!*" he snapped back, and the exclamation was so forceful this time that she felt herself recoil instinctively and purse her lips. She was used to having arguments with her dad from time to time, shouting back and forth almost like a sparring match, but it rarely happened with Mike, and whenever it did, it left her feeling like all the air had left her lungs, like there was a knot at the base of her throat that kept her vocal chords from forming words.

He must've seen the hurt in her expression, because he sighed, the fight leaving his body along with that breath of air. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have yelled," he said, immediately contrite. He took a couple of steps until he was directly by her side and extended a hand down to her.

She stared up at him, hesitating for a moment, but then took it, letting him pull her up to her feet. She wasn't entirely sure what he meant to do when he sat down in the position she had vacated at the foot of the tree trunk, but she got the idea when he pulled her down to sit between his knees, wrapping his arms around her from behind and sighing against her shoulder.

He softly swept her hair to the side and dropped a kiss on her neck, and she felt herself relax almost instantaneously. "I'm sorry," he said again. "I'm just... I'm so sick of seeing people I care about get hurt," he admitted. She leaned her head back against his shoulder. "Already one of us ended up in the hospital, and I *hate* that it might be even worse next time, and there's nothing I can do about it."

She took hold of his hand, which was resting against her arm, and entwined their fingers. She understood his fears—she was scared herself. But she had powers and he didn't, and she knew how that sometimes made him feel impotent. He wasn't even an adult yet, like Hopper or Steve or Joyce, so even in that context his options were limited. For someone like Mike, who cared so deeply for and was so loyal to everyone in his life, whose one guiding instinct was to fiercely defend anyone who needed it, not being able to do anything was especially difficult.

"And I just—" His voice shook. "I don't know what I would do if..." She heard him sniffle, and his grip on her hand tightened. "What if next time it's you in that hospital bed? Or-or what if you—"

"I won't," she assured him, shaking her head. She didn't know this for certain, of course; there was always a chance that something could go wrong, they all lived with that fear every time something like this happened, but she would do anything, say anything, to alleviate the pain she heard in his voice. Whenever he was hurting, she hurt, too.

"El, you could've *died*," he reminded her, his tone desperate. As if she could forget, given the circumstances.

"I didn't." She turned slightly to the side, just as much as the space between his legs allowed, so she could rest her head against the crook of his neck. "I won't," she insisted, taking hold of his hand that she'd had to let go of in order to move. "I promise."

He scoffed. "That's not something you can promise," he shot back, and she understood. Promises were something sacred to them, but it wasn't as easy as just saying the words and hoping for the best. Not anymore, at least. That might've been enough to keep them going at thirteen, but not at nearly sixteen.

"That's why it might be easier for everyone if we just... leave," he added, back to what started this argument in the first place. "I mean... I keep thinking that I'll be able to get my learner's permit soon, and maybe then we could..."

He trailed off, but she understood what he meant to say. She understood now that he wasn't blaming her for anything—she wasn't sure if *she* could shed her self-imposed guilt altogether that easily, but she understood he didn't blame her, and that was everything.

He didn't want to take her away from Hawkins because she was putting the people here in danger; he wanted to take her away so she could hide amongst the crowd, so to speak. To make it more difficult for their enemies, supernatural or not, to find her. And if them going away meant those enemies were no longer looking for her in Hawkins, well, all the better for everybody, right?

She wasn't sure she necessarily agreed with that idea, although she could see why he'd be grasping for any solution other than just "sit and wait for the other shoe to drop." After everything that happened in the past few days, they both still felt so raw. But how could they just leave everybody they loved behind? Going away from Hawkins might make them all safer, but it also might not. What if something happened and they weren't here? What if, unlike when she ran away to Chicago, she couldn't get back in time to protect her family? She'd never forgive herself, and she was sure *Mike* would never forgive himself.

She tried moving further to the side so she could look directly at him, and he shifted his position to accommodate her, so that she ended up sitting sideways, mostly on his lap. That way she could wrap her arms around him properly, as well as look into his eyes when she spoke. "When you get your permit," she started, "if you think we should run away... we'll go."

His eyes widened. "Really?"

She nodded. "I don't want to be apart from you. It hurts too much," she admitted. If it was anyone else she might have thought twice about saying that, but with Mike she had no qualms about it; she knew he understood, because she knew he felt the same way. "If you go, I'll go with you."

"I won't go without you," he admitted back at her, and that was the crux of it, El thought: Mike was not doing this for himself, he never would run away just to save himself—he was only suggesting this because of her, because of *them*, because he wanted to everybody to be safe.

"I know," she whispered as he leaned forward and rested his forehead against hers. "That's why... it won't come to that."

She saw his brows draw together ever-so-slightly. "How can you know for sure?"

"Because I know you," she said as she cupped his cheek in her hand. "You're *so good*, Mike. You don't give up on people. You won't leave them if there's still danger." She smiled. "It's just who you are."

He stayed silent for a few seconds, processing her words, before letting out a sigh. He leaned forward to rest his forehead on her shoulder. "You're probably right," he conceded. "I guess I'm just... after everything that happened, and then going to the hospital today, I'm just... on edge."

"I understand," she said, kissing his cheek sweetly as she ran a hand through his slightly curling hair.

He pulled back a little, gazed at her for a second before leaning in to kiss her lips, soft and steady, making her tremble in a way that had nothing to do with the rainy, chilly weather. Then he leaned back against the tree trunk and she went with him, resting comfortably against him as she played with the collar of his polo.

They stayed like that for a few minutes, until Mike spoke up again. "The rain's starting to slow down," he noted as he gazed out at the lake. "We can go home soon if you want," he offered. It wasn't that late; they still had some time before it got dark, but even if the rain stopped soon, it would still take them a while to get back to their houses because they'd have to walk a lot of the way— the roads around the lake would be too muddy for them to go by bike.

She shook her head. "Let's stay for a little longer."

"Okay," Mike agreed, securing his hold on her. She sighed, letting her guard down for what felt like the first time in days, and cuddled into her boyfriend's warm embrace as they looked out into the lake and watched the sunset between the raindrops.

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Notes: So, I started out intending to write a story about Mike and Eleven having a fight, and somehow... it turned into this? Where they have the shortest argument in history and it's all about how much they both want to protect each other and everyone else? *Thinky face* I don't think I'm doing this right, guys. LOL. xD

Anyway, it turns out that sometimes I write stories that later on inspire other stories. This is one of those. Anyone want to take a gander at which previous story in the series inspired this one? (Hint: I almost ended this with a surprise appearance by Deputy Callahan, but ultimately decided against that. It didn't fit the mood.)

In all seriousness, though, I'm very aware that this show thoroughly spoils us fans when it comes to giving us what we want, and avoiding the really harsh plot turns. I mean, sure, there were Barb and Bob and such (sorry, Barb and Bob), but *Game of Thrones* this show is not. Even the S1 finale, while heartwrenching, was still mitigated by the fact that we all knew Eleven was going to come back somehow. Now, two seasons down the road, none of the main characters have died or even been seriously hurt in any way, and apart from that teeny tiny bit with the Mind Flayer, the S2 finale was basically every fangirl's wet dream.

BUT. Because I am paranoid about these things, I do not expect this trend to continue in subsequent seasons, and am already mentally preparing for it. This story is sort of a response to that feeling. Assuming they stick with the pattern of "one Upside Down encounter every fall," this would technically happen just days after the events of season 4, in the event that a (still hypothetical) season 5 does occur. I can't even begin to speculate on who would get hurt badly enough that they'd have to be hospitalized (hopefully someone *other* than Will?), so I tried to keep it vague, but I'm basically going with the assumption that eventually that's something that's going to have to happen. Because stakes. Feel free to speculate in the comments/reviews, though!

Minor notes: Title from the Pat Benatar song of the same name, which was released in 1985. Also, in Indiana you can apparently get a learner's permit without enrolling in driver's ed when you turn 16, but you can't get an actual probationary license without driver's ed until you're 16 + 270 days. I don't know if it was the same in '86, but I'm gonna go with it either way.